

THE ARMY CHAPLAIN :  
MILITARY OR CIVILIAN

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One thousand-four-hundred-eighty-one Army chaplains are soon to join the ranks of the unemployed. That is, if the advocates of a civilian chaplaincy have their way. Since America's prolonged involvement in Vietnam there has been a gathering storm over the constitutionality and religious relationships in the uniformed chaplaincy. A review of published articles about the chaplaincy shows even the most cursory readers that since 1970 the chaplaincy has been in a social stand-down. Articles published prior to 1970 are favorable to the status quo, but since 1970 show a negativism unparalleled in American history.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the basic concerns of the chaplain's role and relationships are: who should pay the chaplain, should the chaplain wear a warrior's uniform, should the chaplain be part of the power hierarchy, and should the churchman, be subservient to the state? All of the present concerns about the chaplaincy are summed up in whether or not the chaplaincy should be "civilianized". While each of these areas are important, the scope of this paper will deal with some of the real issues that overlap and grown out of the basic concerns.

The real issues, in the attempt to civilianize the chaplaincy, center in the five areas of Christian conscience, constitutionality,

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<sup>1</sup>Cf., Vols. 4, 5 and 6 Index to Religious Periodical Literature, 1957 - 1972.

vocational integrity, vocational identity, and the prophetic ministry. It can easily be seen that from the issues involved divergent groups have united in the common cause of suggesting changes in and even the abolition of the military chaplaincy.

The issue of Christian conscience raises the theological question, "Can a Christian be obedient to the law of love and serve in a military establishment?" In the first century AD the early church fathers declared that a Christian could not serve as a soldier.

A soldier of the civil authority, must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if he is commanded, and to refuse to take an oath; if he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected. A military commander . . . must resign or be rejected. If a catechumen or a believer seeks to become a soldier, they must be rejected, for they have despised God.<sup>2</sup>

In the 17th century the Baptists who served in England's army were the source of dissent during some of England's most turbulent years.

Thus it was that almost to a man they were supporters of the Parliamentary cause, which was the cause of liberty, religious as well as civil. Large numbers of Baptists took service in the armies of Parliament, some of whom rose to a high rank, and were much trusted by the Lord Protector, Cromwell.

The Christian's involvement in war is not a recent issue nor

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<sup>2</sup> B. S. Easton, The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 2:16-20, pp. 41-45.

<sup>3</sup> Robert G. Torbert, A History of the Baptists (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1962), p. 48, quoting Henry C. Vedder, A Short History of the Baptists, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), p. 219.

one that we shall solve in our generation. Ultimately we must leave it to the individual conscience.

The champions of the issue of constitutionality range from atheist Madeline Murray O'Hare, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), to Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU). Stated in its most simple form the question is, "Is the military chaplaincy constitutional?" The answer can logically be said to be that since the military chaplaincy was established in 1775 and is older than the constitution and since the constitution did not abolish the already existing chaplaincy as a violator of the constitution and the first amendment, we may then conclude that the military chaplaincy did not violate the constitution as written and originally ratified.<sup>4</sup>

There are those who are convinced that the chaplaincy is in direct violation of the constitution because the chaplain, when hired by the government, is evaluated by the government. Randolph N. Jonakait concludes,

If the stated purpose of the chaplaincy is to aid the free exercise of religion of the other military personnel the government can then measure how well the chaplains perform their religious duties. Not only can the government make such assessments, it is already doing so in the promotion system. But the secular state does not have the criteria or the ability to make such measurements; indeed, even minimal notions of separation of church and state

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<sup>4</sup>George H. Williams, "The Chaplaincy in the Armed Forces of the United States of America in Historical and Ecclesiastical Perspective," in Military Chaplains ed. by Harvey Cox (New York: American Report Press, 1971), pp. 11-58, passim.

would seem to require that the government refrain from passing judgment on a chaplain's performance.<sup>5</sup>

The American Civil Liberties Union has the following statement as part of its official policy,

The union does not challenge the constitutionality of the chaplaincy program itself because without it servicemen would be deprived of facilities for constitutionally protected free exercise of their religion. It is only the elements of compulsion or discrimination which present issues of civil liberties concern.<sup>6</sup>

Robert McAfee Brown in discussing the "Military Chaplaincy as Ministry" says,

The issue of constitutionality would center, in any event, on the proper form of ministerial presence, and it would be quite possible for the courts to decide that the present form is unconstitutional without invalidating the need for the church to find some other form by which to exercise a ministry to those in the armed forces.

Is the chaplain free to do the work of his ministry while in the pay of the government? The chaplain is sometimes placed in the position of choice. He must choose either to be true to his spiritual calling or subservient to his meal ticket. Succinctly stated by W. Fred Lamar the trauma is that,

Every man who would speak and be heard must do some obsequance [sic] to the institutions of society. Similarly,

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<sup>5</sup>Randolph N. Jonakait, "Is the Military Chaplaincy Constitutional?" in Military Chaplains, ed. Harvey Cox (New York: American Report Press, 1971), p. 137.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 160-161.

<sup>7</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, "Military Chaplaincy as Ministry." in Military Chaplains, ed. Harvey Cox (New York: American Report Press, 1971), p. 161-162.

every man who would be true to what he has to say, must choose to disregard and even attack those social attitudes and standards which he sees as wrong.<sup>8</sup>

This is not a new question. Amos confronted Amaziah about the lack of integrity toward his vocation as priest to King Jeroboam II (Amos 7:1ff). Micaiah about 808 B. C. was imprisoned because he dared give a negative report to King Ahab during a period of national crisis.

Can a chaplain best be identified vocationally in a uniform with rank or in civilian clothing, totally free from the military structure? Of course champions have aligned themselves on either side. Subjective arguments are possible in support of both views. Objective analysis is more difficult to obtain and I am unable to locate anyone who has developed a workable model for a sociological survey.

One view can be seen in the questions of a seventeen-year-old soldier recorded in his diary,

And you? You see there looking at me and I see a man that supposed to represent God. And yet I see he wears the clothes of a master war machine. I see a man that has so many rules over him I begin to think is he a man of god at all?

On the other hand there have been expressions of complete confidence in the present system. Some unmarried, low-ranking servicemen

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<sup>8</sup>W. Fred Lamar, "Who Should Pay the Chaplains?" Christian Herald, July, 1970, p. 1721.

<sup>9</sup>Private papers: 1972.

have accepted the chaplain's uniform and rank as a force for good. They showed fearful contempt that they would lose their advocate in the resolving of their military-spiritual conflicts.<sup>10</sup> Again both views are subjective and must be considered as such. Consider the strong subjective plea of a United Church of Christ task force considering the relevancy of the chaplaincy,

We reject as folklore the belief that rank is not a real barrier between the chaplain and enlisted persons unless the chaplain makes it so. In the military caste system rank is the definitive divider....In addition, it has never been demonstrated that rank really increases the effectiveness of the chaplain ministry. We conclude that rank is a hindrance to be overcome rather than a facilitator of the ministry to military personnel.

Following World War II chaplains of all grades were forbidden to wear grade insignia. The army finally abandoned its "no insignia" ban in 1926 because it was found that the practice deprived the chaplain of status with both officer and enlisted personnel and caused the proper utilization of chaplains to be both unwieldy and ineffective.<sup>12</sup> Again, it has never been shown that not wearing rank would actually

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<sup>10</sup>Interviews of recently discharged military personnel at Fort Hamilton, 1973.

<sup>11</sup>United Church Task Force, Report of the Task Force, Ministries to Military Personnel (Philadelphia:United Church Press, 1973), p.89.

<sup>12</sup>Ray A. Appelquist, ed., "Making the Present Chaplaincy More Fully Civilian." in Armed Forces Chaplains: All Civilians? (A Feasibility Study). Washington, D.C., General Commission on Chaplains and Armed Forces Personnel, The Chaplain, Vol. 29. no.1, 1972.

conceal the position and status of the individual chaplain.

The final issue for the chaplain is the most crucial and important consideration faced up in his prophetic ministry. Can the chaplain, with the present military system of wearing the uniform, holding rank, being subject to a commanding officer, and being accountable to military law, be the prophet that he has committed himself to God to be? Since no adequate sociological study has been made, we must be as objective as possible while admitting our subjectivity.

Solutions to the trauma of the present chaplaincy have centered in the areas of civilianization and demilitarization. Little consideration is being given by the denominational endorsing agencies to the possibility of going to an all-civilian chaplaincy. Cost is perhaps the overriding factor. One attempt to budget such a program came to an excess of \$47,000 annually, per chaplain.<sup>13</sup> At the present it appears that civilianization of the chaplaincy is out of reach for the individual denominations.

The other possibility is more easily in the realm of reality. Demilitarization can be the first step in correcting some of the valid charges raised in both the basic and real issues presented in this paper. Some of the results of demilitarization would be the freeing of the chaplain for a more prophetic role. It is suggested that the chaplain have total freedom to speak out against an unjust war, allow the denominational endorsing agency to share in the evaluation

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-61.



of its own chaplains, and allow the chaplain freedom to exercise his prophetic role without fear of career reprisal.

When it comes to either civilianizing or demilitarizing the chaplaincy I agree wholly with W. Fred Lamar who says,

I have been an artillery officer, military chaplain, civilian (church supported) chaplain to a military installation, parish minister, and am now a church-supported chaplain--campus minister--to a state university. . . .

In my own experience, I have not found any difference between having a military superior who expected me to support the military life, and having a church board in a suburban Alabama community which wanted me to support its belief. . . .

I have helped young soldiers apply for Conscientious Objector status and called in to question the military-industrial alliance while in the army.

In both places I have survived. In both places I have taken similar doses of praise and criticism for my stands. I have found in each situation as much freedom as I had the courage to take--or as I was willing to pay for. Those who wish to speak prophetically must expect the treatment accorded to the prophets of the past.<sup>14</sup>

Until such sociological studies are conducted that can confirm or deny the issues and the solutions, we must continue to commission men of good faith and calling, giving them the necessary freedom in which to minister to servicemen and women of our military complex.

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<sup>14</sup>W. Fred Lamar, "Who Should Pay the Chaplains?" Christian Herald, July, 1970, p. NT/21-22.

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